

Representation of Women in Pre and Post - Islamic Arabian Society: An Appraisal

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Abstract: *In the ancient period of human history, women had always been kept in subordination and treated as inferior to men in rights and privileges. Like other corners of the world, the Arabian society also treated her beyond the animals. She was deprived of basic human rights. However, Islam has rescued her from the brutal persecutions and advocated for her equal status in society. Islam came to honour the woman, guard her, protect her from the wolves of mankind, and secure her rights. Islam has empowered women with the most progressive rights: the right to education, the right to property, the right to marriage, and some other rights. In Islam, women are not inferior or unequal to men. Men and women have the same parents (Adam and Eva), therefore both deserve equal treatment. The Quran has also commanded or promised both of them equally. While Prophet Muhammad honoured women at a time when they were treated as sex toys, Prophet Muhammad once said, "The best of you are those who are best in treating their women" (Sunan al - Tirmidhi 1162). Islam has warned about the unpleasant treatment women receive. This paper will highlight the conditions of women before Islam and the role of Islam in their empowerment.*

Keywords: Women, Islam, Rights

1. Introduction

Women are the opposite gender of men, or we can simply say that man and woman are the two sides of the same coin. The system of the global world is incomplete without women because women make up about half of the global population. So, the development of any society is impossible without the contribution of women. However, her role can be incomplete without giving her equal respect and rights in society. The status of women in the world is neither a new nor a completely resolved issue. The concept of "women empowerment," which has gained traction in the modern world, has its roots in Islamic history. [1] To comprehend women's rights, honour, dignity, and place in Islam, it is necessary to first examine their pre - Islamic circumstances. At the time, they were treated as slaves, and their living circumstances were frequently worse than those of animals. [2] Women were considered worse than slaves in ancient times. They were not considered human beings but a sort of sub - species between humans and animals. However, this type of condition for women was prevalent in every corner of the world. If a man committed murder in Babylonian society, his wife was executed instead of him. Women were seen as the embodiment of evil and sadness in Greek civilization. In Egyptian civilisation, women were regarded as a sign of the devil. In various regions of Eastern Europe and India, if a husband died, his widow was either slain or burned alive with her husband's corpse. [3] Women in Arabian society faced the same challenges as those in the rest of the world. When they learn of the birth of a female child, their faces turn black. They considered the birth of a daughter a curse. Examples of their reactions to the birth of a daughter have been mentioned by Allah in the Quran. As Allah says.

وَإِذَا بُشِّرَ أَحَدُهُمْ بِالْأُنثَىٰ ظَلَّ وَجْهُهُ مُسْوَدًّا وَهُوَ كَظِيمٌ
يَتَوَارَىٰ مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِن سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِ أَيُمْسِكُهُ عَلَىٰ هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ
فِي التُّرَابِ أَلَّا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ

And when one among of them receives the glad tidings of a daughter, his face turns black for the day, and he remains seething. Hiding from the people because of the evil of the tidings; 'Will he keep her with disgrace, or bury her beneath the earth? Pay heed! Very evil is the judgment they impose. [4]

According to the verse above, the Arabs would mock a person in whose home a girl was born, since they believed a female to be worse than an animal. [5] They would not be reproached or blamed if the she - camel had a female child, but they would be grieved and reproached if a woman had a daughter. If the female newborn was not buried alive, she would be considered nothing more than a sexual object whose main purpose was to fulfil the sexual desires of men, and a man could divorce his her whenever he wanted. In contrast to other societies, women in Arab culture were often the victims of their own relatives. Some examples include a father burying a daughter, a husband selling his wife, and a son marrying his stepmother. The victims have no way to protect themselves from the perpetrators of these atrocities because they are members of their own families. It was rare for men to show concern for the emotions and individual goals of women. She was deprived of basic human rights, like the right to life, property, and right to expression, and no one was ready to support her. [6] So, Islam rescued her from hopeless condition and elevated her prominent status.

Islamic perspective

Islam is the key global faith to guarantee women equal rights, roles, and opportunities in all spheres of life, including the home and society. [7] It was founded to end the oppression of women and the degradation of their status. Islam's initial contribution to the advancement of women's rights was to affirm the equal status of men and women in Allah, s eyes. As almighty Allah mentiones.

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ
مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

And indeed We have honored the children of Adam, and We have carried them on land and sea, and have provided them with good things, and have preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preferment. [8]

In accordance with the aforementioned verse from the Quran, Allah respects both men and women equally. Therefore, Islam assured women's equal respect in a society where men were not interested in placing them on par with animals. Islam refuted all of those previous notions, including those who believed them to be an ill omen. Islam advocates that Men and women have the same parents (Adam and Eva), therefore both deserve equal treatment. So Islam ensured equal respect, equal rights, and equal rewards for both of them. There are so many places in the Quran and Hadith where almighty Allah and Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) commanded or promised both of them equally. As Allah says in the Quran.

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ
وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَشِيعِينَ وَالْخَشِيعَاتِ
وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ وَالْحَافِظِينَ
فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ
مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

Surely for Muslim men and women, believing men and women, devout men and women, truthful men and women, patient men and women, humble men and women, charitable men and women, fasting men and women, men and women who guard their chastity, and men and women who remember Allah often—for all of them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward. [9]

In the above mentioned Quranic verse, Allah mentions women equally with men in the case of reward and glad tidings. There are so many other references in the Quran and Hadith which are directly or indirectly speaking about the women empowerment. Once a person in the presence of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) kissed his son and put him on his lap and did not do the same for his daughter who was with him. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) objected and told the man that he was being unjust and that he should have also kissed his daughter and placed her on the other lap. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) not only preached about equal justice to sons and daughters but also practised it himself. [10] In order to protect her throughout her life, Islam stood up for her rights when it was hard to do so in a society that treated women unjustly. Islam protected her right to life by forbidding the execution of female newborns. Their practise of burying daughters was declared a grave sin by Allah.

يَتَوَارَى مِنَ الْقَوْمِ مِنْ سُوءِ مَا بُشِّرَ بِهِ أَيَسْكُةً عَلَى هُونٍ أَمْ يَدُسُّهُ
فِي التُّرَابِ أَلَا سَاءَ مَا يَحْكُمُونَ

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Hiding from the people because of the evil of the tidings; 'Will he keep her with disgrace, or bury her beneath the earth? Pay heed! Very evil is the judgment they impose. [11]

Although they thought that having girls was a cause of humiliation for them, they were burying them alive out of respect for themselves. So Allah will question them and punish them for their monstrous deeds that He strongly condemns in the Qur'an. He says

وَإِذَا الْمَوْءُودَةُ سُئِلَتْ

"and when baby girls, buried alive, are asked" [12]

بِأَيِّ ذَنْبٍ قُتِلَتْ

"for what crime they were put to death, " [13]

The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) not only condemned this culture but also ordered its abolition. He demonstrated to them that supporting their female children would act as a shield between them and the fire of hell. [14] So Islam not only warned about the protection of girls' lives but also provided guidance on how to raise them and informed people to treat them with kindness and affection. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) once said, according to Sunan al - Tirmidhi,

أَكْمَلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِيمَانًا أَحْسَنُهُمْ خُلُقًا وَخَيْرُكُمْ خَيْرُكُمْ لِنِسَائِهِمْ خُلُقًا

"The most complete of the believers in faith, is the one with the best character among them. And the best of you are those who are best to your women". [15]

Islam lifted women out of the shadows and raised them to a position that even civilised societies that profess to appreciate human rights have yet to reach. Before the advent of Islam, women could not get married to the guy of their choice. It is correct that, not long ago, women were sold as pieces of merchandise to their husbands. They were not consulted, nor were they even informed that they had been given in marriage. [16] Islam has so far eradicated all of the oppressive traditions that were harmful to women. It gives women the freedom to pick the husbands they want. In their separate positions, Islam considered them each other's protectors and helpers.

نِسَائِكُمْ هُنَّ لِبَاسٍ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٍ لِهِنَّ

They are a clothing for you and you are a clothing for them. [17]

In Islam, women are not at the mercy of their husbands because Allah created them equal, and no one has a dominant position on their rights and duties to each other. Hence, in addition to offering them the choice of marriage, Allah also gave them the right to divorce. In pre - Islamic Arabia, only the husband had the ability to divorce, which he used in the most brutal ways. He might divorce his wife at any time for no legal or justifiable cause. He might also revoke his divorce and divorce once again if he so wished. [18] Even when a man grew angry with his wife, whether for any legitimate reason or simply to satisfy his caprice, he

might immediately divorce her; however, the unfortunate wife could not take any legal action, receive maintenance from him, or exercise any other rights against him. As per Islamic law, if a husband declares divorce, his wife must wait three months or three menstrual cycles ('iddat'). During this time, the woman is free to live in the same house as the husband, and the husband is responsible for her care and maintenance. Islam also granted her the right to inheritance, as it is well-known that pre-Islamic Arabians viewed women as objects that might be bought, sold, distributed, and inherited. Her parents and spouse would not leave her an inheritance. Islam states that women have the right to inherit property and it is the most significant right that Islam gives to women. [19] Almighty Allah made inheritance payable to all family lines, including women, regardless of their degree of connection.

لِلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانُ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا تَرَكَ الْوَالِدَانُ وَالْأَقْرَبُونَ مِمَّا قَلَّ مِنْهُ أَوْ كَثُرَ نَصِيبًا مَّفْرُوضًا

For men is a share from what the parents and near relatives leave behind, and for women is a share from what the parents and near relatives leave behind, whether the wealth (inheritance) is small or large; the share is a fixed one". [20]

The aforementioned verse demonstrates that the law of inheritance applies to all types of property, both movable and immovable. In Islam, women have property rights in all positions, including mother, sister, wife, daughter, and others. The Quran and Sunnah have detailed all aspects of women's property rights based on their roles.

2. Conclusion

Empowering women in Islam is not a new concept; it is as old as Islamic teachings. Islam rescued women at that juncture, when people were killing their daughters and treating their women just as sexual objects. Islam not only liberated women from the shackles of slavery and oppression but also gave them a respectable position in society. Islam granted them property rights, marriage rights, and above all, the right to life, among other rights that they had earlier been denied. Islam helped in reducing the misconceptions regarding women being considered ill omens or carriers of bad luck. The entire discussion clearly states that Islam has empowered women rather than oppressed them.

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